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HARDY SEDUMS in ALBUQUERQUE

Old Man's Bones...Baby Tears....Dragon's Blood....No, this is not the recipe for witches' brew. These are the common names of some of the sedum species (commonly called **stonecrop**) that I have attempted to grow outside here in Albuquerque. Let's be very scientific and precise. There are two major categories of sedum – those that take over and those that show a bit of restraint and stay where you put them! (I am of course omitting those that died on me.)

I first became interested in sedum when I was a mere child on my grandfather's farm in Kentucky. My grandmother had a large barrel in the back yard. Cascading from the top and from holes in the sides were trailing yellow-green, leafy stems that bore clusters of little yellow star-flowers in late spring. She didn't call the plant sedum. If we called it anything, it was "live-forever" (erroneous) or "**stonecrop**." (Actually the plant is **Sedum sarmentosum**, which will grow in Albuquerque if you give it a bit of extra water and some sun protection.) I took a bucket of mud and handfuls of stems and stuck the sedum pieces into cracks in the stone slab face of the root cellar, holding them in place with a fingerful of mud. It worked. Next spring the root cellar was bearded with green stems and yellow flowers. That's still a workable method for spreading the sprawlers and crawlers of the sedum tribe. In recent years my preferred method has been to transplant by "trowel and error." Since sedums are so forgiving, especially drought-tolerant groundcovers like **Sedum album** (white flowers), I usually spend the spring, especially after a mild winter, giving away sedum by the box.

Sedums are native to many different continents; the varieties for sale in nurseries usually are not native North American species. In general, for the happiest sedum outdoors in Albuquerque, pick a full sun location with well-drained soil. Sedum is perfectly happy growing in with cacti, but small cacti will soon be engulfed and smothered by something like **Sedum album**, which keeps its leaves – and often keeps growing -- all winter. If the stems don't smother your cacti, the abundant clusters of white starry flowers will finish the job. And thinning the sedum out of those hidden spines is no fun. Just like with children, you have to set reasonable boundaries for the groundcover sedums.

The tall clustering, late summer-to-autumn blooming species such as **S. telephium** or **S. spectabile** can mix just fine with clumps of cacti and with other xeriscape plants. These sedums die down to the ground after frost. Next spring, like asparagus, they come up from the rootstock. The commonest **S. telephium** is often sold as "**Autumn Joy**." The convex flower heads begin as light pink, then become dry and rust-colored and are quite attractive. **S. spectabile**, with flat inflorescence, has a number of cultivars ranging in colors from white to pink to purple. "**Brilliant**" (bright pink flowers) is the one I have. I also have a similar plant with variegated cream and green foliage, another find in a Kentucky flower garden. Other possibilities that have become available are "**Frosty Morning**" (white & green foliage, nearly white flowers), **Grandma's Sedum** (smaller mound, pink flowers), **Sedum X "Matrona"** (long maroon stems, pink flowers), and "**Emperor's Purple**" (purplish foliage & stems, deep purple flowers) These species can get 2 to 3 feet tall. A shorter, more delicate-looking erect sedum is sold under the name "**Vera Jameson**" or "**Rosy Glow**." It, too, dies down to the ground at frost. Flowers are an attractive purple-pink.

Most of my sedums have been the sprawling groundcover types. As a groundcover they live up to the name, but unlike some groundcovers, sedums just cannot take foot traffic. If you use them for large areas, I recommend an occasional stepping stone for access. Some of these groundcovers, such as **S. spurium**, have nearly naked stems lying around in winter after the leaves fall off. In full sun, leaves of the variety marketed as "**Dragon's Blood**" show a lot of red. In lower light its leaves remain green. Flowers are a deep red pink. Like most of my sprawlers and crawlers, it blooms in late spring. **S. spurium** can be found with leaves variegated in pink, white, and green. This species does not like to grow in pots. If grown with other groundcover sedums it is easily overwhelmed by the more rampant growers.

The sedum species *sedoides* (aka *sediforme*) and *rupestre* (aka *reflexum*) are commonly sold as “**Blue Spruce**” (because of their fleshy, blue-gray leaves). “**Big**” **Blue Spruce** (*sedoides*) is taller, with stiffer leaves and straw-yellow flowers. “**Little**” **Blue Spruce** (*rupestre*) has softer foliage and greenish-yellow flowers. Both can take very hot dry conditions. “**Angelina**” (probably a variety of *rupestre*) has foliage that becomes tipped with orange/red in cold weather, but is greener in the summer.

Other species I have tried in the past few years include: *S. globosum* (“**Old Man’s Bones**”), *S. hirsutum*, *S. chrysanthemum*, *S. kamschaticum*, *S. platyclados*, *S. ternatum*, *S. dasyphyllum*, *S. spathulifolium* “**Cape Blanco**.” *S. dasyphyllum* has tiny gray-green leaves and persists among rocks, but it is hard to move because the stems are fragile. It breaks apart when you try to pick it up for transplanting. It works best to scrape up a trowel-sized clump of dirt and move the whole thing to a new shallow depression. Other tiny-leafed types include *S. globosum*, *S. grisbachii* and *S. acre* (the latter two with yellow flowers). It’s easy to overwater a clump of *S. acre*. It will die in the middle and the tips of the stems will continue to grow outward.

S. kamschaticum “**Golden Moss**” is an oak-leafed sedum with yellow flowers. One variety has variegated leaves. *S. chrysanthemum* grows in flower-like rosettes of leaves. “**Cape Blanco**” and *S. pachyclados* (from Afghanistan) grow as leggy rosettes of leaves. Over the long haul, many of the groundcover sedums sulk in pots and prefer to be let loose in the garden.

S. ternatum is found from Missouri to the Appalachians; the Cherokee Indians grew it for medicinal purposes and planted it wherever they lived. Its three-part white flowers bloom very early in Albuquerque. It is hardy here if you pamper it with some shade and extra moisture. It actually does better in a pot than many others.

I have also grown two native New Mexican sedums; both are in pots so far. My specimen of *S. wrightii* is from the Alamogordo Dog Canyon area. It has white flowers. I have seen *S. cockerellii* at around 10,000 feet altitude in the Sandias, small plants in limestone cracks producing white to pinkish flowers. My *Cockerell’s Stonecrop* is a purchased specimen.

If you begin to grow hardy sedums in your garden, you will find they can be used in xeriscapes, rock gardens, and in regular flower gardens. The larger mounding ones add color and form late in the summer and disappear for the winter if you cut off the dried stalks. Groundcovers add flower color from spring through the summer; more importantly, their foliage adds color and texture to the foreground or to rocky slopes. Some will keep a spot of green or bluegreen or orange-tipped foliage all winter. Sedums can be grown from seeds, but they are so easy to start by cuttings or by dividing a larger plant, that I have never used seeds. Most sedums do not need rich soil or even excessive fertilization. You will need a large number of friends to whom you can keep on giving the cuttings you will be taking every year!